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A LETTER FROM DICKENS

CHARLES DICKENS was a prince of letter writers, and some of the most delightful of his excursions in this field were written to friends in America. One of these fortunate persons was Professor C. C. Felton, of Harvard. Professor Felton was a frequent and valued contributor to THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW seventy years ago, chiefly as a critic of current literature. Among his book-reviews was an elaborate and warmly appreciative tribute to Dickens, inspired by the appearance of the novelist's *American Notes*. This notice appeared in the REVIEW of January, 1843, and seems to have given great pleasure to Professor Felton's distinguished friend; for on March 2nd Dickens wrote Felton one of his long and rewardingly discursive letters in response to it. The original of this letter was recently sold in New York, at an auction of rare autographs, for $320. Its reproduction here will interest all lovers of Dickens and all friends of the REVIEW. It reads thus:

1 Devonshire Terrace York Gate Regents Park London
Second March 1843.

My Dear Felton.

I don't know where to begin, but plunge headlong with a terrible splash into this letter, on the chance of turning up somewhere.

Hurrah! Up like a cork again—with THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW in my hands. Like you, my dear Felton, and I can say no more in praise of it, though I go on to the end of the sheet. You cannot think how much notice it has attracted here. Brougham called the other day with it (thinking I might not have seen it) and I being out at the time, he left a note, speaking of it, and of the writer, in terms that warmed my heart. Lord Ashburton (one of whose people wrote a notice in the *Edinburgh*, which they have since publicly contradicted) also wrote to me about it in just the same strain, and many others have done the like.

I am in great health and spirits, and powdering away at *Chuzzlewit*, with all manner of facetiousness rising up before me as I go on. As to news, I have really none, saving that Forster (who never took any exercise in his life) has been laid up with the rheumatism for weeks past, but is now, I hope, getting better. My little captain, as I call him—he who took me out, I mean, and with whom I had that adventure of the cork soles—has been in London too, and seeing all the lions under my escort. Good Heavens! I wish you could have seen certain other mahogany faced men (also captains) who used to call here for him in the morning, and bear him off to Docks and rivers and all sorts of queer places, whence he always returned late at night, with rum and water tear-drops in his eyes, and a complication of Punchy smells in his mouth! He was better than a comedy to us—having marvellous ways of tying his pocket handkerchief round his neck at dinner time in a kind of jolly embarrassment—and then forgetting what he had done with it. Also of singing songs to wrong tunes, and calling land objects by sea names, and never knowing what o'clock it was, but taking midnight for seven in the evening; with many other sailor oddities, all full of honesty,

manliness and good temper. We took him to Drury Lane Theatre to see *Much Ado about Nothing*. But I never could find out what he meant by turning round to Kate after he had watched the first two scenes with great attention, and enquiring "whether it was a Polish piece"!

Forster must make haste and get well, for this day month, the Second of April, is our wedding day and his birthday; on which high festival, we always go down in great state to Richmond (an exquisite place on the river Thames: some twelve miles off) and hold a solemn dinner, whereat we empty our glasses, you may believe. On the fourth, I am going to preside at a Public Dinner for the benefit of the Printers; and if you were a guest at that table, wouldn't I smite you on the shoulder, harder than ever I rapped the well-beloved back of Washington Irving at the City Hotel in New York!

You were asking me—I love to say, asking—as if we could talk together—about Maclise. He is such a discursive fellow, and so eccentric in his might, that on a mental review of his pictures I can hardly tell you of them as leading to any one strong purpose. But the annual exhibition at the Royal Academy comes off in May, and then I will endeavor to give you some notion of him. He is a tremendous creature, and might do anything. But like all tremendous creatures He takes his own way, and flies off at unexpected breaches in the conventional wall.

You know Hone's Every Day Book, I dare say. Ah! I saw a scene of mingled comicality and seriousness at his funeral some weeks ago, which has choked me at dinner-time ever since. George Cruikshank and I went as mourners, and as he lived, poor fellow, five miles out of town, I drove George down. It was such a day as I hope for the credit of Nature is seldom seen in any parts but these—muddy, foggy, wet, dark, cold and unutterably wretched in every possible respect. Now, George has enormous whiskers which straggle all down his throat in such weather, and stick out in front of him, like a partially unravelled birds'-nest; so that he looks queer enough at the best, but when he is very wet, and in a state between jollity (he is always very jolly with me) and the deepest gravity (going to a funeral, you know) it is utterly impossible to resist him: especially as he makes the strangest remarks the mind of man can conceive, without any intention of being funny, but rather meaning to be philosophical. I really cried with an irresistible sense of his comicality all the way, but when he was drest out in a black cloak and a very long black hat band by an undertaker, who (as he whispered me with tears in his eyes—for he had known Hone many years—was "a character, and he would like to sketch him") I thought I should have been obliged to go away. However, we went into a little parlor where the funeral party was, and God knows it was miserable enough, for the widow and children were crying bitterly in one corner, and the other mourners—mere people of ceremony who cared no more for the dead man than the hearse did—were talking quite coolly and carelessly together in another; and the contrast was as painful and distressing as anything I ever saw. There was an Independent clergyman present, with his bands on and a bible under his arm who as soon as we were seated, addressed George thus in a loud emphatic voice—"Mr. Cruikshank. Have you seen a paragraph respecting our departed friend, which has gone the round of the morning papers"—"Yes Sir," says George, "I have"—looking very hard at me the while, for he had told me with some pride, coming down, that it was his composition. "Oh!" said the clergyman. "Then you will agree with me Mr. Cruikshank that it is not only an insult to me who am the servant of the Almighty, but an insult to the Almighty whose servant I am"—"How's that Sir?" says George. "It is stated, Mr. Cruikshank, in that paragraph," says the Minister, "that when Mr. Hone failed in business as a bookseller, he was persuaded by me to try the Pulpit, which is false, incorrect, unchristian, in a manner blasphemous, and in all respects contemptible. Let us pray." With which, my dear Felton—and in the same breath, I give you my word—he knelt down, as we all did, and began a very miserable jumble of an extemporary prayer. I was really penetrated with sorrow for the family, but when George (upon his knees, and sobbing for the loss of an old friend) whispered me that if that wasn't a clergyman, and it wasn't a funeral, he'd have punched his head, I felt as if nothing but convulsions could possibly relieve me.

Tell Longfellow that I can't find that book of his, but that I have some others from the Shakespeare Society for him; and that I want to know whether I shall send them to Hillard. Remember me heartily to our Hillard, and to Sumner, and all friends. We have been greatly concerned at Mrs. Felton's not being well, but hope your next accounts will be more favorable. Our united love to her. Tell me something, in your next, about Dr. Channing's family. Disgusted with our established church, and its Puseyisms, and daily outrages on common sense and humanity, I have carried into effect an old idea of mine, and joined the Unitarians, who would do something for human improvement, if they could, and who practise charity and toleration. The Tories will love me better than ever, if this gets wind. My children shall return the compliment, please God!

Faithfully Always, My Dear Felton C. D.

We reproduce also some passages from the review of *American Notes* which gave so much pleasure to Dickens. Professor Felton (who, like many of the sorely oppressed literary critics of his day, was compelled to hide his light under the bushel of anonymity) wrote, in part, as follows:

His command over the English language, in its most native and idiomatic parts, is really marvelous. His style is original, almost beyond that of any writer of English in this age. It is formed, not by the study of classical models, not by consuming the midnight oil in laboriously mastering the learning of books; but it is caught from the lips of men, speaking under the influence of the passions in daily life. . . .

But, with all its excellences Dickens's style is marred by several solecisms, which the writers of the last twenty years have admitted into their works, and these he repeats again and again. The use of "directly" in the sense of "as soon as,"[1] is an abomination first made popular, though not first used, by Bulwer, and appearing more than a thousand times in Dickens's works. It is an irredeemable cockneyism, and as such never to be tolerated in good society. Several other expressions of this sort now and then occur, such as the new-fangled and most uncouth solecism, "is being done," for the good old English idiomatic expression "is doing",—an absurd periphrasis driving out a pointed and pithy turn of the English language. But these are hardly enough to injure seriously the character of his style, or to detract materially from its singular purity and grace.

We were not surprised at the enthusiasm with which his late arrival was hailed in the United States. Some few individuals,—as is always the case with popular excitements,—were disposed to sneer. But, when we consider the extraordinary influence that this young author had wielded; the beautiful humanity that everywhere breathed from his pages; the delicacy from which, in the wildest freaks of fun and frolic, he had never departed; the deep sympathy he had ever shown with the afflicted of his race; the exquisite creations which his genius had so lavishly poured out upon the world, and the years of enjoyment he had brought to every house in the land; we cannot help feeling that the universal enthusiasm with which he was welcomed was perfectly natural, and just what was to be expected from a generous people. . . .

Long before this, all American readers have read the *Notes for General Circulation*. They have been scattered over the country by the penny press, with the speed of rail-road and steam-boat. We believe they have been read with general approbation. Certainly they are pleasant reading, and highly characteristic of their author. Persons who expected from Dickens long disquisitions upon what are called American Institutions,—philosophical tirades upon the working of the republican machine of government,—or the future prospect of the world as affected by what we style the great experiment of self-government,—expected what they had no right to look for from the author of *Pickwick*. Mr. Dickens had too much good sense to attempt a work for which he was unprepared by previous studies, habits of thought,

[1] This is, apparently, an ineradicable Britticism, for it still mars the prose of excellent English writers.—Editor.]

and intellectual peculiarities; for which, had he possessed every needful prerequisite, his residence in the country was too short, and his opportunities of calm observation too limited and few. But he has a quick eye, from which nothing that comes within its range escapes; in his rapid passage from place to place he would seize many characteristic points, and take in at a glance many amusing traits. Little incidents that others would pass unnoticed, with him would be the germs of entertaining remark.

We had a right, therefore, to expect from him, not a didactic work, but a book full of graphic touches, good feeling, and pleasant observation; and in this expectation we have not been disappointed. Many of his strictures have given offence in various quarters. Some people seem to think, that if a fault of manners, or an inconvenience of social arrangements, or an awkward or disagreeable habit, is described by a traveler, it is described as something peculiar to them. Thus Dickens's humorous pictures of the discomforts of steam and canal boats, and stage coaches,—though all who have ever felt them, acknowledge the striking fidelity of his pencil,—are meant as satires upon American civilization in particular, and as if such things were found nowhere else; and not a little very excellent wrath has been expended upon him on that most gratuitous supposition. We have heard no defense set up against the charge of tobacco-chewing and spitting. In these two pleasant habits, we suppose we stand by general consent, and by our own admission, preëminent among the nations of the earth. It may indeed be true,—we presume it is so,—that Dickens notices the little discomforts of traveling more frequently than philosophical travelers would be likely to do;—not because he is disappointed and vexed at finding such things are, but because he has a lively susceptibility, and they strike him in a picturesque or ludicrous light; because he has a natural inclination to work up little incidents, which the common man thinks nothing of, into scenes; and this natural tendency of the creative faculty has, in his case, been heightened by long habits of inventive composition. It may be too,—we fancy it is,—the fact, that Dickens has never been much of a traveler. Probably his previous wanderings had not extended far beyond the immortal journeying of the Pickwickians; so that he could only have drawn comparisons, had he been disposed to do it at all, between the United States and England. We see nothing to complain of in the peculiarity of his book just touched upon; on the contrary, we are pleased to have, in their original freshness, the impressions made by our country on such a mind as his. With some of these we are far from agreeing. What he says of the absence of humor in the New England character, is directly opposed to the result of our own observations, and we can have no doubt, that he is here mistaken. In several minor matters of fact, he is unquestionably wrong.

The style of this book is, like that of Dickens's other writings, free, graphic, and flowing. It has a rapid movement, as if he wrote as fast as his pen could be driven across the paper. Sometimes, therefore, it is incorrect, and it is frequently disfigured by the two or three solecisms we have mentioned before. It abounds in touches of the poetical and imaginative. Striking expressions, brilliant descriptions, witty turns, and humorous sallies, are scattered in sparkling profusion over its animated pages. The sea-passages have attracted great and deserved admiration. The graver parts of the book,—such as the visit to the Blind Institution at South Boston, the affecting account of Laura Bridgman, and the forcible comments upon the solitary system of prison discipline in Philadelphia,—are written in a deep, earnest, fervent spirit, and come from a heart throbbing with the best sympathies of our nature. The tone of the book, throughout, is frank, honest, and manly. He has steered clear of all personalities, though he has not lost, through over fastidiousness, any point of what he deems to be the truth. He has shown excellent taste in mentioning his peculiar reception here, only in the most general terms, and that, too, at the conclusion of his book.